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Bath/Mikveh

"Mikveh" (pl. mikva'ot), literally referring to a "gathering" as in a "gathering of water" (*mikveh mayim*; Lev 11:36), is today commonly used to designate a manmade deep, stepped pool that is being used for ritual immersion and purification from the state of impurity caused, for instance, by contact with sexual fluids or diseases. Archaeological excavations and surveys have uncovered hundreds of such water installations in the southern Levant, mainly in modern Israel but also in the West Bank, southern Lebanon, and western Jordan.

Textual sources

The Hebrew Bible records that "bathing" in water was necessary for purification from the state of ritual impurity (Lev 11–15; Num 19). This could be obtained through various means, such as contact with carrion, childbirth, skin diseases, and bodily discharges (e.g. seminal, menstrual, illness-related). Such impurity affected not only humans, but also clothing, vessels, and other objects.

As testified by the accounts of Josephus and Philo, as well as in the Dead Sea scrolls, the act of ritual bathing – and, with it, a focus on ritual impurity – received more interest during the 2nd century BCE to 1st century CE. While these later accounts referred to ritual washing as described in the Hebrew Bible, they tended to gloss over the various details of purification, as if all were handled similarly (e.g. Jos. *Ant.* 3.261–265, 269; Philo, *Spec.* 1.261–262). At the same time, they also introduced ritual uses of washing that are not mentioned in earlier texts, such as hand washing (*Let. Aris.* 305–306; Jos. *Ant.* 12.106; Philo, *Cont.* 66, 89), washing in preparation for prayer (Jdt 12:7–9; Jos. *Bell.* 2.128–129), and washing after defecation (Jos. *Bell.* 2.149). The wider range of practices during this period associated with ritual washing suggests a greater diversity and innovation than before, but also hints towards the greater significance of this practice during this period.

It is difficult to deduce from these texts how ritual bathing was practiced. Josephus (*Bell.* 2.161) notes that Essenes remained clothed for washing, while the Dead Sea scrolls offer some information on how ritual bathing was carried out (see Lawrence, 2006, 141–149). What is clear is that these later accounts emphasize full immersion in respect to ritual bathing (e.g. Jos. *Ant.* 3.263; CD X: 10–13; Mark 7:3–4; Luke 11:38), as well as the amount and nature of water in which one immersed (CD X: 10–12; 4Q270 6 iv 21). The use of "living water," such as that of rivers, lakes and springs,

as well as rain water, was regarded as most important for ritual purification washing (e.g. Lev 14:5, 50–52; 15:13; 4Q213[a] 1 i 6–10; 11QT[a] XLV 15–17), something also emphasized in later rabbinic traditions (see below).

The first discussion of a manmade installation that was used for ritual immersion and purification is found in the rabbinic literature only. Both the Mishnah (redacted c. 200–225 CE) and the Tosefta (redacted c. 3rd cent. CE) offer an entire tractate, entitled *Miqwa'ot*, to situations that would validate or invalidate the water of such ritual immersion baths. The Mishnah is also the first textual source to give this installation a specific name: "bet tevilah" ("house of immersion"; e.g. *m Parah* 3:7; *Yoma'* 3:2–3) or, more commonly, "mikveh" ("gathering"; e.g. *m Miqw.* 1:1). A mikveh was not necessarily a manmade installation, but was by the rabbis also used for natural sources of water that were considered ritually pure such as lakes and springs (*m Miqw.* 1:1, 4–8).

The rabbinic discussions on the validity of water for ritual purification specified what needed to be considered in the construction of a mikveh. For instance, rain or spring water (i.e. living water) had to be channelled directly into the installation (*m Miqw.* 2:3–9) and the installation had to contain at least 40 *se'ah* of water (often considered equal to approx. 500 l, though precise volume remains debated; *m Miqw.* 1:7). Notwithstanding the specifications being given, the rabbinic literature provides no fixed conception of how a manmade mikveh looked like (see Miller, 2015, 32–103).

Modern scholarship

For a long time, mikva'ot were not given much consideration in the study of early and rabbinic Judaism. In his three-volume study *Talmudische Archäologie*, Samuel Krauss (1910, 2:219) discusses them merely in passing and mentions the term "mikveh" only once. This changed when excavations led by Yigael Yadin at Masada in 1963–64 exposed a stepped, plastered installation attributed to the Sicarii defenders there (66–73/74 CE). The installation, found in the southern casemate wall, was connected to an adjacent plastered pool via a pipe in its wall. Yadin and others thought that the exposed installation pool bore strong structural similarities with modern mikva'ot, where the immersion pool is usually connected to an adjacent reservoir (*'ôsār*), and hence suggested a similar functionality. The *'ôsār* would have been filled with rainwater, which could make any drawn water in the stepped pools suitable upon contact by opening the pipe between these installations. Thus, though similar installations were already known from Beth She'arim and Khirbet Qumran, Yadin identified for the first time a stepped installation as a mikveh.

Largescale excavations in the late 1960s and '70s in Jerusalem's Old City exposed dozens of these stepped, plastered pools. Ronny Reich, who worked in the Jewish Quarter excavations, identified these as ritual purification baths and indicated that the presence of an adjoining *'ôsār* was not necessarily required for the pools to be suitable for ritual immersion. His subsequent 1990-dissertation (published in updated form as Reich, 2013), in which he surveyed and examined over 300 stepped pools in the southern Levant, lay the groundwork for the archaeological study of mikva'ot. Since then, Yonatan Adler (2011) has updated this picture and identifies in his dissertation over 850 stepped pools as mikva'ot.

With a large number of stepped pools across Israel identified as mikva'ot, scholars of New Testament and early Christianity, among others, began to consider this evidence as a persuasive indicator of purity observance among Jews in early Roman Judaea. Disagreement, however, surged concerning how to interpret the spread and variety of pools in terms of religious observance of people. Some, notwithstanding the noted variety in design and context of these pools (see below), have viewed the spread of mikva'ot as a general acceptance of ritual purity laws among the Jewish population at large (Sanders, 1992, 223; Hengel and Deines, 1995). Others take a more minimalist stance in which mikva'ot are understood as a heightened concern with personal purity only there where such installations have been found (Regev, 2000).

Over the last two decades, however, more critical attitudes have been fostered towards joining textual and material sources for our understanding of mikva'ot and associated bathing practices. Benjamin Wright (1997) was one of the first to caution on using (later rabbinic) texts to identify earlier-dated stepped pools as functioning primarily for ritual purification, as rabbinic mikva'ot. This caution of reading too much in our textual sources for understanding the usage of excavated stepped pools led to a stronger emphasis on the archaeological context and material aspects of these pools (Galor, 2003; 2007; Berlin, 2005, 451–453; Adler, 2011). Simultaneously, it has led to a more cautionary study of the textual sources on ritual bathing practices. This has led to a "softer" understanding of the potential usage of these pool, which could have had other functions alongside ritual bathing (Miller, 2015). Moreover, this more critical reading also has shown that the adjacent reservoirs that previously were understood as an *'ôsār* were in fact not used as such. As Adler (2014) has shown, the *'ôsār* is not discussed as a device in any ancient source but was a much later innovation of the nineteenth century.

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Structural characteristics

If one were to describe a mikveh, probably the most characteristic definition would be a rectangular pool, sometimes roofed, that is hewn into the bedrock and coated with hydraulic plaster, with a flight of steps spanning its full width, and which is fed (either directly or, indirectly, through a connected cistern or reservoir) by rainwater that was collected and channeled from a building's rooftop (**Fig. 1**). However, since the term "mikveh" is a functional rather than a structural description, neither ancient texts nor modern scholars provide a common standard for its material components, construction methods, and ultimate design. There are some defining elements, though, that scholars nowadays use to identify a mikveh in the archaeological record.

As with other installations that are used to hold water (e.g. cisterns, aqueducts, pools), in order for water not to leak directly into the ground, mikva'ot are almost always found coated with hydraulic lime plaster. Exceptions to this are few. Four recently exposed mikva'ot at Magdala/Taricheae, a site located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee (northern Israel), were built in alluvial clay and thus were fed by groundwater seeping through its stone masonry walls (Reich & Zapata Meza, 2014).

Another notable feature – often deemed a mikveh's most iconic feature – is the presence of a flight of steps leading from the rim of the pool to the floor. Mikva'ot therefore often also go by the (structural) name "stepped pools". Usually these steps span the pool's entire width, though in some examples the steps form a narrow staircase abutting one of the pool's inner walls – sometimes descending in a straight direction, sometimes taking a bend. In the latter cases, such baths bear a striking resemblance to – and, as a result, have sometimes been confused with – wine vats from the Late Roman or Byzantine period that have been exposed in the region.

Mikva'ot were usually carved out of the bedrock. In some cases, they had ceilings, either made of bedrock or vaulted manmade constructions, while in other cases the steps and pool area was simply kept unroofed. There are rare instances where the installation was not hewn into bedrock at all, but constructed entirely of stone masonry and plaster. The pools also come in different shapes and sizes. Most are trapezoidal or rectangular, but round and ovoid examples are known as well. Similarly, while some pools are barely able to fit one individual, the largest known pools are able to fit several individuals easily.

Some mikva'ot have a low partition running down the middle of the steps or a double entrance into the pool, essentially dividing the staircase into two. It is generally suggested, often through reference to textual accounts (*Let. Aris.* 105–106; *m Šeqal.* 8:2; P.Oxy. 840; see Miller, 2015, 56–62, 104–152 for discussion), that such partitions and double entrances acted as a 'divider' between those going into the pool and those coming out of it, in order to avoid physical contact and contamination.

Physical functioning

It is commonly understood that, as indicated by textual sources (see above), miqva'ot had to be fed directly by 'living' water. With the exception of the recent discovery of groundwater-filled pools at Magdala/Taricheae, this means in most cases that rainwater was collected on (part of) a building's roof from where it was distributed through vertical pipes and rock-hewn channels directly into the stepped pool, or, alternatively, first into a cistern or reservoir that was connected to such a pool. However, because only the lower courses of a house usually preserve in the archaeological record, there is for the vast majority of pools little to no evidence of how water was collected and distributed to them.

Moreover, as none of the found pools show evidence of an outlet from which used water could be discharged, little is known about the frequency and methods by which these pools were eventually emptied and cleaned. Possibly this was done manually. This makes changing the water and cleaning the mikva'ot a more challenging task that may have not been carried out frequently. A related concern is that, if not frequently changed, the stagnant water in these open pools posed a likely hygienic risk for its surroundings. For example, aside from other health risks, these pools probably were attractive breeding grounds for various mosquito species responsible for malaria (see Kligler, 1930, 41 for an early modern example). However, it is unclear how used water could have been regularly changed in these pools during the long and dry summer in the semi-arid region of the southern Levant. On the other hand, in the absence of water outlets in these pools, it is equally unclear in the majority of cases how these pools coped with the discharge of superfluous rainwater in the event of heavy rainfalls during winter.

Finally, little has been done so far with the effect of climate change on the collection and usage of water in these pools in this semi-arid region, although paleo-climatic proxy data and archaeological

evidence from the region shows that the heyday period of construction and usage of mikva'ot was an extremely humid and rainy period with high lake water levels (e.g. Dubowski et al., 2003). The fact that this in the centuries that followed (starting c. 2nd–3rd cent. CE) changed to a drier climate with reduced rainfall may be one explanation for the decline in usage of earlier mikva'ot and the severely reduced construction rate of new ones around this time (for other explanations, see below).

Archaeological context

The majority of mikva'ot are found in domestic contexts, on the ground floor or basement level. They appear both in elite urban mansions as well as in smaller farmstead houses. In the Hasmonean and Herodian palaces, they usually are located in its private bathing facility, where they functioned as a plunge pool in the *frigidarium* (e.g. Jericho, Herodium). In most cases, however, the specifics regarding their location within houses remains not well understood. Some pools apparently had a public, communal function, such as those located near some of the 1st century CE synagogues (e.g. Gamla). No such communal mikva'ot have been found near any of the late Roman and Byzantine synagogues. In Jerusalem, a large number of mikva'ot are found near entrances to the temple, such as the Huldah Gates, the Robinson Arch, and the Wilson Arch, where they were probably used by Jewish pilgrims.

A number of mikva'ot have also been found near winepresses and oil presses, where peasants apparently used them to ensure the ritual purity of the wine and oil produced there. The Mishnah alludes to the presence of mikva'ot near such installations (*m Miqw.* 7:3) and describes the necessity of winemakers and olive press workers to immerse (*m Tehar* 10:3). Finally, some mikva'ot have been attested near catacombs and other burial sites, presumably to be used by those who had contracted corpse-impurity through indirect contact. While the Priestly Code (Num 19:11–19) instructs a process of purification of seven days for those who had direct contact with a corpse, one who only had indirect contact was considered impure only until that evening (*m 'Ohal.* 1:1). The latter was a less severe form of impurity for which bathing alone would suffice.

Chronological and geographical distribution

The earliest found mikva'ot date to the Hasmonean period and were constructed around the late 2nd or early 1st century BCE. Stepped, plastered pools from this early period have been exposed in Jerusalem, Jericho, and Khirbet Qumran, as well as further north in Gamla. However, in Marissa, a large Hellenistic town in Idumea (southern Israel), comparable installations were already found in

use during the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, before the arrival of the Hasmoneans there in 112/11 BCE. This may testify to (perhaps similar ritual) bathing practices among Marissa's earlier Idumean population.

From around the time of Herod the Great onward, but especially during the 1st century CE, mikva'ot were in use throughout the Herodian kingdom: from Galilee in the north to Idumea in the south, as well as on the eastern banks of the Jordan River. There are however conspicuous geographical blanks in the distribution of these pools, with relatively few of them found in settlements in the coastal plain, in the Golan (except Gamla), and in the West Bank (ancient Samaria). The precise reasons for this are still unclear, but may have something to do with the regions' particular geology (solid basalt underground in Golan), history of research (a lack of excavations and a poor state of reporting on excavations in the West Bank), or population at that time (little is known about whether and how Samaritans would have practices ritual purification).

The largest concentration of these baths is found in and around Herodian Jerusalem, where they served the large local population of the town as well as Jewish pilgrims. Another large concentration of around two dozen mikva'ot has been found in and around the Western Quarter of Sepphoris (northern Israel). However, after exploration and identification of mikva'ot surged in the 1990s, hundreds of stepped pools have turned up in (rescue) excavations in rural areas of Idumea, Judea, and Galilee as well. The number of mikva'ot found in these villages or farmsteads varies sharply. At some sites, such as in the town of Gamla, the low number of mikva'ot suggests that at least some of them may have had a communal function.

Moving outside the southern Levant, into the setting of the Jewish Diaspora, material remnants of mikva'ot in the archaeological record become conspicuously absent (Rutgers, 1998, 105). The identification of a bell-shaped cistern that was found near a Hellenistic-period building (the alleged "synagogue") at Delos as a mikveh is highly doubtful, nor is the identification of a late-antique water basin that was recently found at Limyra (south-west Turkey) as a mikveh in any way secure. Later mikva'ot do appear from the late 6th or 7th century CE onwards in the Mediterranean region, such as one in Syracuse (southern Italy). Yet, no comprehensive study of these late antique mikva'ot has so far appeared, leaving us without any details of the structures and their precise regional distribution.

The main majority of the hundreds of found mikva'ot in Judea, Idumea, and Galilee went out of use in the later 1st or in the first half of the 2nd century CE. Sometimes they simply were built over by new structures without mikva'ot, in other cases these stepped pools were given different functions, such as storage chambers, glass refuse pits, or pottery dumps. The reasons for why these pools were no longer used for ritual purification are not clear. Reich (2013) suggested that the decline was a direct result of the cessation of the Temple cult in 70 CE, a theory still followed by many. Recently, Adler (forthcoming) has suggested, however, that many, if not most, mikva'ot continued in use after 70 CE and may have only fallen out of use after the later Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–135 CE). One reason for this decline around this time, though speculative as such, may be the fact that Jews no longer understood the Pentateuchal Laws as prescriptive but rather as descriptive, and hence saw no practical purpose for ritual purity any longer.

Stepped, plastered pools that were built or continued in use as mikva'ot postdating 70 CE and the Bar Kokhba Revolt are far fewer in number, not more perhaps than several dozen or so. They mostly are found in Galilee and in the southern Hebron hills, mainly in large concentrations in the towns of Sepphoris and Susiya respectively. In the case of Sepphoris, however, it remains unclear how many precisely continued in use as mikva'ot after the 2nd century CE and how significant they still were for its population. The continued significance of these pools to its population is often merely presumed (e.g. Miller, 2015, 185–197). In fact, it is noteworthy that during the new construction spree in Sepphoris during the 2nd–3rd centuries CE, most notably on its acropolis and on the lower plateau to the east, no efforts were made to include mikva'ot in any of the new houses. One has to await, however, the final publications of the largescale excavations at Sepphoris in order to clarify better the ill-defined picture of the ongoing life of the mikveh in the southern Levant after the 2nd century CE.

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